

INTRODUCING  
*The* ANCIENT  
GREEKS

EDITH HALL

## **Contents**

*Cover*

*About the Book*

*About the Author*

*Also by Edith Hall*

*Maps*

*Dedication*

*Title Page*

*Epigraph*

*Preface*

*Timeline*

Introduction: Ten Characteristics of the Ancient Greeks

1. Seafaring Mycenaeans
2. The Creation of Greece
3. Frogs and Dolphins Round the Pond
4. Inquiring Ionians
5. The Open Society of Athens
6. Spartan Inscrutability
7. The Rivalrous Macedonians
8. God-Kings and Libraries
9. Greek Minds and Roman Power
10. Pagan Greeks and Christians

*A Note on Sources*

*Suggestions for Further Reading*

*Acknowledgments*

*Index*

*Copyright*

## About the Book

### **Who *were* the ancient Greeks?**

They gave us democracy, philosophy, poetry, rational science, the joke. But what was it that enabled them to achieve so much?

The ancient Greeks were a geographically disparate people whose civilization lasted over twenty centuries - and that made us who we are today. And here Edith Hall gives us a revelatory way of viewing this scattered people, identifying ten unique personality traits that she shows to be unique and central to the widespread ancient Greeks.

Hall introduces a people who are inquisitive, articulate and open-minded but also rebellious, individualistic, competitive and hedonistic. They prize excellence above all things but love to laugh. And, central to their identity, they are seafarers whose relationship with the sea underpins every aspect of their society.

Expertly researched and elegantly told, this indispensable introduction unveils a civilization of incomparable richness and a people of astounding complexity.

## About the Author

EDITH HALL is one of Britain's foremost classicists, having held posts at the universities of Royal Holloway, Cambridge, Durham, Reading, and Oxford. She regularly writes in the *Times Literary Supplement*, reviews theater productions on radio, and has authored and edited more than a dozen works on the ancient world. She teaches at King's College London and lives in Gloucestershire.

ALSO BY EDITH HALL

*Inventing the Barbarian*  
*The Theatrical Cast of Athens*  
*Cultural Responses to the Persian Wars*  
*The Return of Ulysses*  
*New Directions in Ancient Pantomime*  
(with Rosie Wyles)  
*Greek Tragedy*  
*Ancient Slavery and Abolition*  
*Adventures with Iphigenia in Tauris*

TRANSLATOR/EDITOR

*Medea and Other Plays*  
(with James Morwood)  
*Persians*



A boy musician riding a dolphin. Detail of a red-figure Etruscan vase of the mid-fourth century BC in the National Archaeological Museum of Spain, Madrid. (*Photograph: Alberto Rivas Rodríguez. Museo Arqueológico Nacional, Spain N.I. 1999/127/3*)







*To My Family*

# Introducing the ANCIENT GREEKS

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From Bronze Age Seafarers to  
Navigators of the Western Mind

EDITH HALL



—As some grave Tyrian trader, from the sea,  
Descried at sunrise an emerging prow  
Lifting the cool-hair'd creepers stealthily,  
The fringes of a southward-facing brow  
Among the Aegean isles;  
And saw the merry Grecian coaster come,  
Freighted with amber grapes, and Chian wine,  
Green bursting figs, and tunnies steep'd in brine;  
And knew the intruders on his ancient home,  
The young light-hearted Masters of the waves . . .

—MATTHEW ARNOLD, *The Scholar  
Gypsy*, 231-40

## Preface

Between 800 and 300 BC, people who spoke Greek made a rapid series of intellectual discoveries that propelled the Mediterranean world to a new level of civilization. This process of self-education was much admired by the Greeks and Romans of the centuries that followed. As this book explains, however, the history of the ancient Greeks began eight hundred years before this period of accelerated progress, and survived for at least seven centuries afterward. When the texts and artworks of classical Greece were rediscovered in the European Renaissance, they changed the world for a second time.

The phenomenon has been called the Greek “miracle,” as well as the “glory” or “wonder” that was Greece. Many books have been entitled *The Greek Genius*, *The Greek Triumph*, *The Greek Enlightenment*, *The Greek Experiment*, *The Greek Idea*, and even *The Greek Ideal*. But over the last two decades the notion that the Greeks were exceptional has been questioned. It has been stressed that the Greeks were, after all, just one of many ethnic and linguistic groups in the ancient Mediterranean world. Long before the Greeks appeared in the historical record, several complicated civilizations had arisen—the Mesopotamians and Egyptians, the Hattians and Hittites. Other peoples provided the Greeks with crucial technological advances; they learned the phonetic alphabet from the Phoenicians and how to mint coins from the Lydians. They may have learned how to compose elaborate cult hymns from the Luwians. During the period when the Greeks invented rational philosophy and

science, after 600 BC, their horizons were opened up by the expansion of the Persian Empire.

In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, our understanding of the other cultures of the ancient Near East advanced rapidly. We know far more about the minds of the Greeks' predecessors and neighbors than we did before the landmark discovery of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* on clay tablets in the Tigris Valley in 1853. There has been a constant stream of newly published writings in the languages of the successive peoples who dominated the fertile plains of Mesopotamia (Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, Assyrians). The words of Hittites on the tablets found at Hattuša in central Turkey and the phrases inscribed on clay tablets at Ugarit in northern Syria have been deciphered. New texts as well as fresh interpretations of writings by the ancient Egyptians continue to appear, requiring, for example, a reassessment of the importance of the Nubians to North African history.

Many of these exciting advances have revealed how much the Greeks shared with their predecessors and neighbors. Painstaking comparative studies have been published that reveal the Greek "miracle" to have been one constituent of a continuous process of intercultural exchange. The Greeks were innovators, but they could never have made the progress they did without adopting many of their skills, ideas, and practices from their non-Greek neighbors. It has become a new orthodoxy that the Greeks were very similar to their ancient Near Eastern neighbors in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Levant, Persia, and Asia Minor. Some scholars have gone so far as to ask whether the Greeks came up with anything new at all, or whether they merely acted as a conduit through which the combined wisdom of all the civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean was disseminated across the territories conquered by Alexander the Great, before arriving at Rome and posterity. Others have seen sinister racist motives at work, and accused classicists of

creating in their own image the Oldest Dead White European Males; some have even claimed that classicists have systematically distorted and concealed the evidence showing how much the ancient Greeks owed to Semitic and African peoples rather than to Indo-European traditions.

The question has thus become painfully politicized. Critics of colonialism and racism tend to play down the specialness of the ancient Greeks. Those who still maintain that there was something identifiably different and even superior about the Greeks, on the other hand, are usually conservatives who have a vested interest in proving the superiority of Western ideals and in making evaluative judgments of culture. My problem is that I fit into neither camp. I am certainly opposed to colonialism and racism, and have investigated reactionary abuses of the classical tradition. But my constant engagement with the ancient Greeks and their culture has made me more, rather than less, convinced that they evinced a cluster of brilliant qualities that are difficult to identify in combination and in such concentration elsewhere in Mediterranean or ancient Near Eastern antiquity. After an outline of these qualities in the introduction, the ten chapters of the book take us on a chronological journey through important points in Greek history. These also involve a geographical journey, since the center of Greek activity and achievement shifted over time from the peninsula and islands that constitute the Greek nation today to significant communities in Italy, Asia, Egypt, Libya, and the Black Sea worlds. But most of the ancient Greeks, however scattered across time and space, shared most of these qualities most of the time. In this book I try to explain what I understand these qualities to be.

Taken singly, most Greek achievements can be paralleled in the culture of at least one of their neighbors. The Babylonians had known about Pythagoras's theorem centuries before Pythagoras was born. The tribes of the Caucasus had brought mining and metallurgy to

unprecedented levels. The Hittites had made advances in chariot technology, but they were also highly literate. They recorded the polished and emotive orations delivered on formal occasions in their royal court, and their carefully argued legal speeches. One Hittite king adumbrated Greek historiography when he chronicled in detail his frustration at the incompetence of some of his military officers during the siege of a Hurrian city. The Phoenicians were just as great seafarers as any Greeks. The Egyptians told *Odyssey*-like stories about sailors who went missing and returned after adventures overseas. Pithy fables similar to those of Aesop were composed in an archaic Aramaic dialect of Syria and housed in Jewish temples. Architectural design concepts and technical know-how came from the Persians to the Greek world via the many Ionian Greek workmen, named *Yauna* in Persian texts, who helped build Persepolis, Susa, and Pasargadae. But none of these peoples produced anything quite equivalent to Athenian democracy, comic theater, philosophical logic, or Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.

I do not deny that the Greeks acted as a conduit for other ancient peoples' achievements. But to function successfully as a conduit, channel, or intermediary is in itself to perform an exceptional role. It requires a range of talents and resources. Taking over someone else's technical knowledge requires an opportunistic ability to identify a serendipitous find or encounter, excellent communicative skills, and the imagination to see how a technique, story, or object could be adapted to a different linguistic and cultural milieu. In this sense, the Romans fruitfully took over substantial achievements of their civilization from the Greeks, as did the Renaissance Humanists. *Of course* the Greeks were not by nature or in potential superior to any other human beings, either physically or intellectually. Indeed, they themselves often commented on how difficult it was to distinguish Greek and non-Greek, let alone free person from slave, if all the trappings of culture, clothing, and adornment

were removed. But that does not mean they were not the right people, in the right place, at the right time, to take up the human baton of intellectual progress for several hundred years.

This book attempts to give an account of the ancient Greeks spanning two thousand years, from about 1600 BC to AD 400. They lived in thousands of different villages, towns, and cities, from Spain to India, from the freezing river Don in the northeastern corner of the Black Sea to remote upland tributaries of the Nile. They were culturally elastic, for they often freely intermarried with other peoples; they had no sense of an ethnic inequality that was biologically determined, since the concepts of distinct “races” had not been invented. They tolerated and even welcomed imported foreign gods. What united them was never geopolitics, either. With the arguable exception of the short-lived Macedonian Empire in the later fourth century BC, there never was a recognizable independent state run by Greek speakers, centered in and including what we now know as Greece, until after the Greek War of Independence in the early nineteenth century. What the ancient Greeks shared was their polysyllabic and flexible language, which still survives today, in similar form, despite centuries of serial occupations of Greek-speaking regions by Romans, Ottomans, Venetians, and others. The stamina of this language, by the mid-eighth century BC, was underpinned by the universal Greek familiarity with certain poems composed in it, especially those of Homer and Hesiod. The major gods celebrated in these poems were taken by the ancient Greeks wherever they settled, and worshipped in sanctuaries with sacrifices. But this book sets out to answer a single question: Beyond their cultural absorbency, their language, their myths and Olympian polytheism, what exactly did the ancient Greeks, living in hundreds of diverse communities scattered across so many coasts and islands, ever have in common?



# Timeline

## BC

- c. 1550 Mycenaean Greek civilization begins
  - Destruction of pre-Greek Minoan Palaces; the
- c. 1450 Mycenaeans, using Linear B script, are ascendant in mainland Greece and Crete
- c. 1200 The collapse of Mycenaean palace civilization
- c. 1050 Poseidon's sanctuary at Isthmia in operation
- c. 950 Tomba cemetery built at Lefkandi, Euboea
  - 776 Foundation of the games at sanctuary of Zeus in Olympia
- c. 770 Greeks begin to use the Phoenician phonetic alphabet
- c. 630 Foundation of Cyrene in Libya
- c. 625 Birth of Thales of Miletus
  - 594 Solon's reforms at Athens
    - Inauguration of the Panhellenic Pythian games at
  - 582 Delphi; Inauguration of Panhellenic Isthmian games at Isthmia
- c. 575 Foundation of Massalia
  - 573 Inauguration of the Panhellenic Nemean games at Nemea
- c. 546 Cyrus the Great of Persia overthrows Croesus and conquers Lydia
- c. 534 Foundation of Elea in south Italy
  - 528 Death of Athenian tyrant Peisistratus
  - 514 Assassination of Hipparchus, brother of the

- Athenian tyrant Hippias, son of Peisistratus
- 510 Deposition of Athenian tyrant Hippias, son of Peisistratus
- 507 Cleisthenes reforms the Athenian constitution
- 490 First Persian invasion of Greece; battle of Marathon
- 480 Second Persian invasion of Greece; battles of Thermopylae and Salamis
- 479 The Persians are defeated by the Greeks at the battle of Plataea
- 472 Aeschylus's tragedy *Persians* is first performed, at Athens
- 464 Sparta devastated by earthquake; revolt of the Spartan helots
- 461 Murder of Ephialtes, Athenian revolutionary; democratic reform of the Athenian Areopagus
- 458 Aeschylus's tragic trilogy the *Oresteia* first performed, at Athens
- 451 Pericles proposes a law restricting access to Athenian citizenship
- 444 Foundation of Panhellenic colony at Thurii in south Italy
- 432 Completion of the Parthenon
- 431 Outbreak of Peloponnesian War; first performance of Euripides' tragedy *Medea*
- 430 Pericles' funeral oration
- 429 Plague begins at Athens
- 425 Athenians score success against the Spartans at the battle of Sphacteria
- 413 Athenian campaign in Sicily ends in disaster
- 411 Oligarchic coup at Athens
- 410 Restoration of the Athenian democracy
- 405 Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs* first performed, at

## Athens

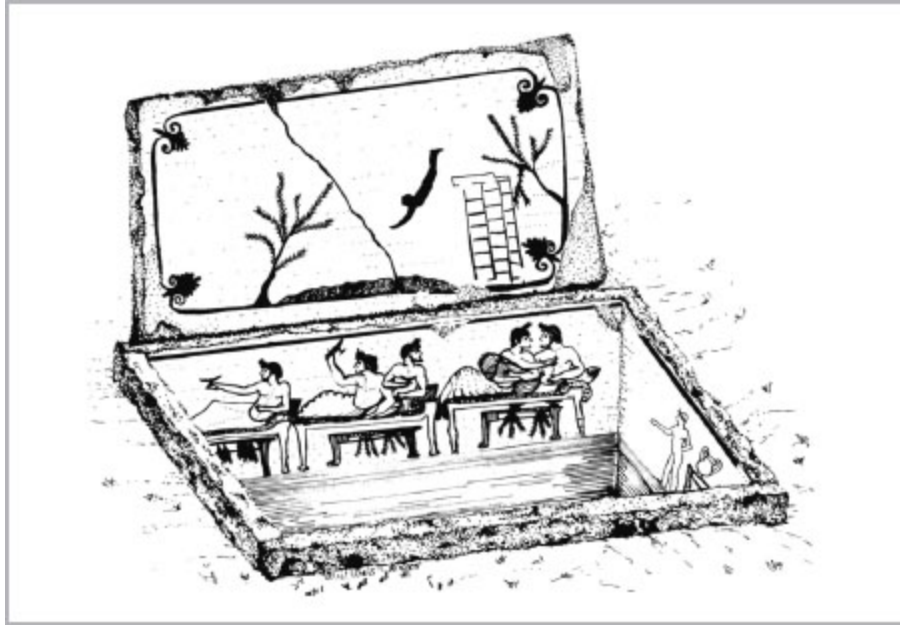
- 404 Athenians surrender to the Spartans, who impose the regime of the Thirty Tyrants
- 403 Democracy restored at Athens.
- 399 Execution of Socrates
- c. 387 Plato founds the Academy at Athens
- 371 Defeat of Sparta by Thebes
- 343 Aristotle appointed tutor to the future Alexander III (the Great)
- 338 Philip II of Macedon defeats Athens and Thebes at the battle of Chaeronea
- 336 Philip II of Macedon is murdered and Alexander III succeeds to the throne
- 335 Aristotle founds the Lyceum
- 334 Alexander visits Troy and campaigns on the western coast of Asia
- 333 The Macedonians under Alexander defeat the Persian army at Issus
- 332 Gaza and Egypt surrender to Alexander
- 331 Alexander defeats the Persians at the battle of Gaugamela
- 330 Alexander takes over the Persian Empire
- 327 Alexander invades India
- 323 Death of Alexander sparks off the Wars of the Successors between his Macedonian generals
- 321 Ptolemy I of Egypt takes Alexander's corpse to Egypt
- 307 Seleucus I founds Seleucia
- 306 Epicurus founds his philosophical school at Athens
- 305–4 Demetrius, son of Antigonos the One-Eyed, besieges Rhodes
- 301 Zeno starts teaching Stoic philosophy at Athens;

- death of Antigonus the One-Eyed at the battle of Ipsus; Seleucus I founds Antioch on the Orontes
- c. 297 Demetrius of Phalerum arrives in Alexandria to advise Ptolemy I on the construction of the library
- 283 Death of Ptolemy I
- 281 Foundation of the Attalid dynasty at Pergamum
- c. 274 Grand Procession of Ptolemy II
- 246 Death of Ptolemy II
- 175 Seleucid King Antiochus IV invades Jerusalem
- 168 Romans conquer Macedonia at the battle of Pydna
- 146 Roman defeat of the Peloponnesians at Corinth and destruction of Carthage
- 133 Attalid kingdom bequeathed to Rome
- 88- First and second Mithridatic wars between Rome
- 81 and Mithridates VI, king of Pontus
- 73- Third Mithridatic war ends with Mithridates ordering
- 63 his attendant to kill him
- Cleopatra VII of Egypt and her husband and ally
- 31 Mark Antony are defeated by Octavian (soon to become Augustus) at the battle of Actium

## AD

- c. 30 The crucifixion of Jesus
- 50 St. Paul writes the first Epistle to the Thessalonians
- c. 61 The Gospel according to Mark is written
- 66- Jewish revolt against Rome
- 73
- 96 Assassination of the Roman emperor Domitian
- c. 108 Arrian records the teachings of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus
- 131- Hadrian organizes a group of Greek cities under the
- 32 heading Panhellenion

- c. 160 Pausanias writes his *Description of Greece*
- 161-66 War between Rome and Parthia
- 267-74 Zenobia is queen of Palmyra and revolts against Rome
- 301 Armenia adopts Christianity as official religion
- 312 Constantine's soldiers fight under standards bearing the Christian monogram
- 325 Constantine invites Christian bishops to the Council of Nicaea
- 349 Libanius is appointed Sophist of Constantinople
- 354 Libanius settles in Antioch
- 363 Death of the last pagan emperor Julian (the Apostate); Libanius's obituary for Julian
- 365 Earthquake and tidal waves destroy Alexandria
- 380-91 Edicts of Theodosius I forbid pagan religious practices
- 395 The Delphic oracle is closed down; final partition of the Roman Empire



Drawing of the Tomb of the Diver at Paestum by Alice Walsh, reproduced from p. 366 of R. Ross Holloway, "The Tomb of the Diver," in *American Journal of Archaeology* 100, no. 3 (2006): 365-88. (Courtesy of Archaeological Institute of America and American Journal of Archaeology)

## INTRODUCTION

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# Ten Characteristics of the Ancient Greeks

MOST ANCIENT GREEKS shared ten particular qualities most of the time. Of these, the first four—that they were seagoing, suspicious of authority, individualistic, and inquiring—are tightly interconnected and the most important. Beyond these initial four qualities they were also open to new ideas; witty; competitive; they admired excellence in talented people; were elaborately articulate; and were addicted to pleasure. But with these ten universal qualities we run up against a problem in modern attitudes toward writing about the past. Some scholars prefer to downplay the role of individual excellence in the shaping of history, instead emphasizing economic, social, or political tendencies manifested across populations or social strata. This type of account assumes that history is uncomplicated enough to be understood without acknowledging individual brains as well as broad contexts, and asking how the two interact. Let me explain how my account differs. If the philosopher Aristotle, for example, had not been born into a medical family favored by the Macedonian monarchs, whose power was based on new wealth from gold mines, he might never have enjoyed the leisure, resources, travel, and education that went into his intellectual formation. He certainly would not have encountered men like Alexander the Great, with the military power to change the world. But that does not

mean that Aristotle's intellectual achievements are not, frankly, awe-inspiring.

Throughout this book I try to show the connections between the contribution made to the emergence of outstanding individual Greeks—Pericles and Leonidas, Ptolemy I and Plutarch—by the social and historical contexts into which they were born, and by the ten features of the ancient Greeks' mind-set that in many ways defined them as an ethnic group. The social and historical contexts in which the narrative of ancient Greek history is here discussed also break down into ten periods: the Mycenaean world from 1600 to about 1200 BC (chapter 1); the emergence of the Greek identity between the tenth and the eighth centuries (chapter 2); the era of colonization and tyrants in the seventh and sixth (chapter 3); the early scientists in Ionia and Italy in the sixth and fifth (chapter 4); democratic Athens in the fifth (chapter 5); Sparta in the early fourth; Macedonia in the later fourth (chapters 6 and 7); Hellenistic kingdoms in the third to first centuries (chapter 8); Greeks under the Roman Empire (chapter 9); and the relationship between pagan Greeks and early Christians leading up to the triumph of the new monotheistic faith at the end of the fourth century AD (chapter 10). In each chapter, starting with the Mycenaeans and their skill as mariners, I also give special attention to the aspect of Greekness among the ten qualities previously listed that I consider particularly conspicuous within that context. This is not to say that other ancient Mediterranean civilizations did not share some of the characteristics I think in combination defined the Greeks. The debt owed by Greek culture to the literate trading Phoenicians, for example, is necessarily addressed at some length in this introduction. But almost all of the ten "Greek" characteristics were present, to a varying degree, in most Greeks throughout most of their history.



\*

The ancient Greeks were enthusiastic seafarers. In 490 BC the important Greek city of Eretria was burned to the ground by the invading Persians, and its population taken captive, never to return. The Persian king made the Greek prisoners found a colony far inland, between Babylon and Susa. A poem attributed to the philosopher Plato imagines their collective tombstone inscription in Asiatic exile:

*We left the deep roar of the Aegean Sea  
And lie here in the central plain of Ecbatana.  
We salute you, Eretria, once our famed fatherland.  
We salute you, Athens, neighbour of Eretria. We salute  
you, beloved sea.*

The Eretrians' destroyed fatherland had been a harbor town. But ancient Greeks hardly ever settled more than twenty-five miles—a day's walk—from the sea. Early Greeks lived in hundreds of small communities along the coast that were autonomous and independent-minded, practicing a way of life that was the inevitable response to their physical environment. Most of the farmable land in the Greek peninsula and islands is isolated by mountains, or sea, or both. There are only twenty-five thousand square miles in Greece today, which means it is smaller than all but ten of the states in the United States and much smaller than Portugal or Scotland. But Greece contains no fewer than twenty-six areas where the land rises higher than three thousand feet, making travel by land endlessly challenging. Moreover, the number of headlands, inlets, and islands makes the proportion of coastline to land area higher than in any other country in the world.

The Greeks felt trapped when they were far inland, and traveled hundreds of miles to find places to build towns that had easy access to the sea. Their communities therefore

came to line many of the shores of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea and their islands. They were one of the most littoral peoples the planet has ever seen. Their preferred mode of transport was by ship, although they still preferred not to sail too far from land. As Plato put it, they chose to live “like frogs or ants around the pond.” They were cultural amphibians. The notion of the creature that is at home on land and in the sea was imaginatively displaced in Greek myth onto the sea’s actual inhabitants, who were usually imagined by the Greeks as half human and half beast—Glaucus, once a fisherman, ate a special herb and became the original merman, half man and half fish, with green-blue skin.

At the end of the thirteenth century BC, the Egyptian king Merneptah had an inscription set up at the Karnak temple complex to celebrate his victory over a group he calls “Peoples from the Sea,” who almost certainly included Greeks. Seafaring was intimately bound up with the ancient Greeks’ own sense of identity. In the epic *Iliad*, written around the eighth century BC, Homer introduces the earliest account of the people who were the ancient Greeks. It is a list of the communities who in the mid-eighth century BC regarded themselves as being united because they could enjoy poetry in Greek and had long ago fought together in the siege of Troy. It formed the very core of the Greek sense of self for at least twelve centuries subsequently. But it is not structured as a list of geographical places, or tribes, or dynastic families. It takes the form of a catalogue of *ships*.

The Greeks’ sense that they were masters of the sea is also expressed in their attitude to swimming. The Athenians believed it was the duty of every father personally to teach his sons how to read and how to swim: The proverb characterizing the most uneducated type of man said he could “neither read nor swim.” The Assyrians and Hebrews both portray their enemies drowning, but the Greeks’ conviction that they were the best swimmers in the world

was a core constituent of their collective identity. They felt this was proved during the Persian Wars in the fifth century BC, when many of the enemy had drowned; the Greeks also celebrated the notable exploits of two expert Greek divers—Skyllias and his daughter Hydne—who had sabotaged the enemy fleet from underwater. The Greeks had developed the science of diving to a sufficiently high level to enable practitioners to stay below water, for considerable lengths of time, with the aid of inverted air containers lowered to them by force.

Nearly fifty years ago, in June 1968, a beautiful image of a diver was discovered in a tomb of the early fifth century BC excavated at Posidonia (Paestum) in the part of southern Italy that Greeks had colonized. The diver was painted on the underside of the lid of a rectangular tomb. On its four walls were painted equally beautiful scenes of men enjoying themselves on couches at a symposium. The man buried in the tomb, surrounded by his drinking companions, would be able to look forever at a picture of a diver suspended between a stone-built diving board and the inviting turquoise water into which his outstretched hands are about to plunge.

Some have said that the dive has an erotic message. For others, the scene of diving is a metaphor for dying, for the leap between the known and the unknown worlds, between the elements, perhaps with occult resonances connected with Orphism or Pythagoreanism. But the painter has taken the trouble to add just a slight growth of hair to the diver's chin in specially diluted paint. The diver is touchingly young. Did he look at all like the deceased? Could he simply have been famous for his skill at diving?

The heroes of Greek myth whom the young were trained to admire were outstanding divers and swimmers. Theseus, the son of Poseidon and mythical founder of the Athenian democracy, proved his mettle on the voyage to Crete before he even met the Minotaur. He accepted a challenge to dive

down to the depths and retrieve Minos's ring from the palace of his father. But even Theseus's feat was outdone by Odysseus's distance swim after his raft broke up. He used raw muscle power to resist the line of breakers crashing on the shore of Scherie and keep away from the coast until he could find a landing-place free of rocks and turbulent winds.

Unsurprisingly, the Greeks used metaphors to do with the sea, ships, and sailing for almost every sphere of activity. In the *Iliad*, when the Greek army goes into battle it looks "like a wave rearing close-ranked out of the sea under the blast of the west wind." The sight of Odysseus to his lonely wife, Penelope, who has not seen him for decades, is like the first glimpse of land to a shipwrecked mariner. But the seashore was also a place where Greek heroes like to think, which perhaps made it inevitable that maritime imagery would become common in descriptions of thought processes. Nestor, the wise old counselor in the *Iliad*, faced with a strategic problem on the battlefield, pondered the alternatives deeply, "like the vast sea when it darkens with a silent surge before swift shrill winds arise, but it doesn't roll forward at all nor to either side until Zeus brings the gale to a critical point." The king in a tragedy by Aeschylus, faced with an international crisis, says he needs to engage in profound deliberation, "like a diver descending into the depth." To read a treatise on philosophy was to go on a voyage: when Diogenes the Cynic philosopher came to the end of a long and unintelligible book, he said with sardonic relief, "I can see land!"

The very earliest Greek literature, dating from the eighth century BC, already shows ethical issues such as guilt and responsibility being explored at an extremely sophisticated, proto-philosophical, and indeed *politicized* level. The second outstanding feature of the ancient Greek mind-set that we shall encounter repeatedly is their suspicion of authority, which found expression in their advanced political

sensibility. This quality receives special attention in chapter 2, "The Creation of Greece." In the *Iliad*, the right of any one individual or elite group to determine the whole community's actions is questioned more than once by members of the Greek army at Troy. When the Greek soldier Thersites, who is not a king, wants to persuade his compatriots at Troy to return home, we are told that he uses his customary tactic of "railing at all who were in authority." He tries to make the others *laugh* at their leader. But Odysseus pours expert scorn on Thersites and manages to get the army's laughter directed at the protestor rather than at Agamemnon, Thersites' target. Although Thersites' mutiny fails, the inclusion in the *Iliad* of his criticism of Agamemnon's privileges hurls the epic's audience into political consciousness.

Leaders are consistently scrutinized by Greek authors and usually found wanting. Odysseus faces a near-mutiny in the *Odyssey*, on Circe's island. He had sent out a reconnaissance cadre of twenty-two men led by Eurylochus, who returns to report that all the others in the advance party have been turned into swine. Eurylochus, reasonably enough, discourages the remaining crewmen from taking such a risk themselves and issues a stern rebuke to Odysseus. Even the Spartans, who were no democrats, suspected rulers who gave themselves airs and graces. When two Spartans named Sperthias and Bulis were on an embassy to the Persian king, whose court was hierarchical and run according to elaborate ceremonial protocols, his courtiers tried to make them perform the obligatory prostration or *salaam* before him. The Spartans absolutely refused, explaining that Greeks reserved such obeisance for images of gods, and, besides, it was not for this reason that they had come.

The undoubted "stropky" streak in the Greek character raises the question of whether it was shared by their women. In classical democracies, where the rebellious

tendency became constitutionally actualized, there is evidence to support this view. Thucydides tells us that during the revolution in Kerkyra (Corfu), the women of democratic families climbed the roofs of their houses, joining in the fight and hurling down tiles onto the heads of their oligarchic opponents below. The speeches that survive from the ancient courts of law also show that although their legal rights were shockingly few, women operated in determined and devious ways to maximize their influence. Ancient Greek men may have wanted their women to be docile and retiring. But the force and frequency with which they enunciated this ideal of femininity suggest that women did not always embrace it.

How the Greeks reconciled their suspicion of authority with their almost universal acceptance of slavery presents something of a challenge. But perhaps it is this paradoxical link between the Greeks' independent streak and their ownership of slaves that led them to prize individual freedom so highly. The word for freedom, *eleutheria*, means the opposite of the word for slavery. It meant collective freedom from rule by another people, such as the Persians, but it also meant individual liberty. Even the poorest citizens of Greek states possessed precious rights as free men, *eleutheroi*, which they would lose if enslaved. Moreover, the fear of slavery was an ever-present reality for everybody in antiquity; the earliest surviving example of a private letter by a Greek is a desperate plea by a father, about to be enslaved and deprived of his property, to his son Protagoras. It was written on a plate of lead by a man living to the north of the Black Sea in the early fifth century BC. We must wonder whether a society that did not have slave ownership at its core could ever have produced such a strong definition of individual freedom.

The idea of individual freedom underlies the third characteristic of the ancient Greeks that was instrumental in their intellectual progress: a marked sense of individual